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Mania and Meaning

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Mania and Meaning

Is there anything I am open to and that could address me ...
... or is it just a short circuit in my brain? (P25).

The research presented in this thesis was conducted at Altrecht GGz, Utrecht and the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen, Netherlands.

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Mania and Meaning

A mixed methods study into religious experiences
in people with bipolar disorder: occurrence and significance

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Chapter 2

Ouwehand, E., Wong, K., Boeije, H., & Braam, A. (2014). Revelation, delusion or disillusion: Subjective interpretation of religious and spiritual experiences in bipolar disorder. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 17(6), 1-14. doi: 10.1080/13674676.2013.874410.

Chapter 3

Ouwehand, E., Muthert, H., Zock, H., Boeije, H., & Braam, A. (2018). Sweet delight and endless night: A qualitative exploration of ordinary and extraordinary religious and spiritual experiences in bipolar disorder. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 28(1), 31-54. doi: 10.1080/10508619.2018.1415085.

Chapter 4

Ouwehand, E., Braam, A. W., Renes, J. W., Muthert, J. K., Stolp, H. A., Garritsen, H. H., & Zock, T. H. (2019). Prevalence of religious and spiritual experiences and the perceived influence thereof in patients with bipolar disorder in a Dutch specialist outpatient center. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 207(4), 291-299. doi: 10.1097/NMD.0000000000000965.

Chapter 5

Ouwehand, E., Zock, T. H., Muthert, J. K., Boeije, H., & Braam, A. W. (2019). "The awful rowing toward God": Interpretation of religious experiences by individuals with bipolar disorder. *Pastoral Psychology*, 68(4), 437-462. doi: 10.1007/s11089-019-00875-4.

Chapter 6

Ouwehand, E., Braam, A. W., Renes, J. W., Muthert, J. K., & Zock, T. H. (2019). Holy apparition or hyperreligiosity: prevalence of explanatory models for religious and spiritual experiences in patients with bipolar disorder and their associations with religiousness. *Pastoral Psychology*, Online Publication p. 1-17, doi: 10.1007/s11089-019-00892-3.

Prologue and acknowledgements

My journey into the field of religious experiences and psychopathology began within my own family. A predisposition towards psychosis and an interest in religious matters went hand in hand in my father's life and evoked my interest in the psychology of religion and psychiatry. While studying theology in Groningen, this interest led me to Nijmegen, to Willem Berger and Jan Van der Lans, where I took my first steps along the path of empirical research. I was impressed by the way the above-mentioned combined theology and psychology. They fueled my curiosity about the lived religiosity of ordinary people and the influence of culture on this religiosity. In my thesis about new feminist religious movements I wanted to combine a psychology of religion approach with a religious studies approach. Religious studies was the second subject I was excited about at that time. Hans Kippenberg's lectures on Max Weber and on the influence-of-language theory for the understanding of religion has influenced my thinking right up to the present. However, synthesizing religious studies with the psychology of religion was a step too far at that time.

After graduating I immediately immersed myself in hospital chaplaincy within mental health care. I had to learn other things than intellectual reflection on religion and religiosity, for example to patiently endure my own inability to change the life of others and at the same time to develop sufficient wisdom to be able to sustain and express hope in my contacts with patients. After years of pastoral practice, patients' life narratives and the role religious experiences played in their lives brought me back once more to my initial interest in the subject of the present study. Looking back on the intellectual heritage of the period in which I studied theology I must say that with my dissertation project I picked it up where I had previously stopped: it is a renewed attempt to look from different scientific angles at a phenomenon – religious experiences of people with bipolar disorder – that can be approached but not exhaustively explained scientifically. And yet in my opinion, this multidisciplinary approach of studying such a complex phenomenon as religious experiences in the context of psychiatry adds to our understanding of it.

A special word of thanks goes to Professor Arjan Braam. The whole project would not have led anywhere if he had not taken seriously my first hesitant steps into research. As soon as I had revealed my intentions, he immediately brought me into contact with Kwok Wong, trainee psychiatrist at Altrecht, with whom I started interviewing patients and analyzing the first interviews. Arjan stimulated me to write the first article, before the official Ph.D. program had begun, provided me with other co-interviewers when Kwok left Altrecht or participated in interviews himself when no-one was available. The study was enriched by the multidisciplinary quality of the supervisory committee. Prof. dr. Hetty Zock and dr. Hanneke Muthert accepted me as a Ph.D. student although psychodynamics was not my topic. Hanneke consolidated my original intentions: to clarify the interpretation of religious experiences by persons with bipolar disorder themselves. These interpretations were to be quite separate from scientific explanations of those experiences. Hetty was a

continuous supporting fulcrum behind the whole process in all its ups and downs. Her precise and consistent commentaries and her availability at both my despairing and happy moments were heartwarming and helped me to continue. Both Hanneke and Hetty were very stimulating in the organization of a symposium about religious experiences within the context of mental health care. Dr. Hennie Boeije and Arjan Braam indispensably contributed to the empirical quality of the study. Hennie taught me how to do qualitative research and contributed a great deal to a clear textual structure. Arjan explained to me the principles of statistics of which I had no idea at the beginning of this study, although I wanted to answer the question of the prevalence of the studied phenomenon from the outset. I remember sitting in an overcrowded train in the quiet carriage, when he phoned me to explain what a Chi-square analysis is, using yellow, blue and red Indians with or without religious experiences as an expressive example.

Therefore, I would like to thank each of my supervisors for their unique contribution to the dissertation process. I am grateful to the members of the thesis committee – Professor Marjo Buitelaar, Professor Lars Danbolt, and Professor Ralph Kupka – and the opponents – Professor Chris Cook, Professor Marieke Pijnenborg, and Dr. Brenda Mathijssen – for all their work they have put in evaluating my dissertation.

I would also like to thank the psychiatrist trainees who conducted the interviews with me and invested a lot of their time: Kwok Wong, travelling on his motorbike to our meeting point from where we visited participants at home, Dirk Kwakkel, Charissa Zijp and Joke van Nieuw Amerongen-Meeuse (MD). I think the interviews and the reflections on them afterwards were quite a different experience from what they were used to in their daily work and I hope it all contributed to their understanding of the religiosity of patients. I wish to thank my colleagues of the Altrecht Bipolar department in Lunetten and Woerden, who made it possible to conduct the study and also Janwillem Renes for his co-authorship and advice as a specialist in bipolar disorder. Their efforts to engage patients in the study gave me a clear understanding of the difficulties of doing research in clinical practice. The continuous presence of the research assistants during the survey study, Heike Garritsen, Hanne Stolp, Nika Hendriksen and Lieuwe Visser was of crucial importance as well, both with regard to including participants as to teaching me how to work with SPSS.

Professor Joop de Jong made me aware of the work of Arthur Kleinman, which proved to be an incredibly useful foundation in analysis. The Ph.D. networks I participated in, both in Groningen and in Utrecht helped me in the analyzing process and in clarifying what I wanted to say. Special thanks go to Joep van de Geer, with whom I spent two weeks of writing in a monastery, with a joyful exchange of views at the end of the day, and to Arjan Lelivelt, who took the effort of commenting on several of the articles. I thank Elizabeth Harding for her engaged editing, poems, and supporting emails, Hetty Vonk for the correction of the quantitative articles and Antoinette Hanekuyk for designing and carrying out the lay-out of the book.

To all the participants in the study I am most grateful. After the first ten interviews, Emmy van de Heuvel and José Hoekstra, associated with the patient organization, were enormously stimulating in helping me to get acquainted with the field of study and finding participants. They invited me for relevant meetings and conferences, and were always interested in my progress. I thank all participants in the study for their trust in sharing

often intimate stories of their religious experiences and their struggle to integrate those in their life story and for the joy and pain they shared. Many other people contacted me after we had already finished the interviewing process. Their reactions and the feed-back we received from participants in the survey reinforced time and again my initial presumption that the subject of the study is important for people with bipolar disorder.

Last but not least, I now express my gratitude to my family and friends. I thank Florus and Marina, my paranymphs, who supported me in the last stage of the journey. My sisters Mariëtte and Anke, always available for a relaxing break. The whole project gradually became a family enterprise, with my son helping with the survey study and teaching me to make tables and figures, my daughter engaging in a creative process to produce a *Youtube* video in both Dutch and English, including the beautiful illustrations of Judith de Haan and the spoken translation by Ferra Heskin, my nieces Leanne and Adine for transcribing interviews and my mother for supporting me financially. And Sietse, I do not know how to thank you. You were confident about the process and the outcome all the time, despite the crises I have gone through; you travelled with me across countries where I had to present papers and through all my trials and tribulations with your indispensable sense of humor: without you this project would have been impossible.

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